

THIS EXHIBITION IS ABOUT NOW: Tasmanian Aboriginality at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the design and execution of two exhibits about Tasmanian Aboriginality at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. The first is a Tasmanian Aboriginal group exhibit from 1931, which was heavily informed by ideologies of Tasmanian primitivity and extinction. The second is 2008's *tayenebe*, a celebration of the resurgence of fiber work among Tasmanian Aboriginal women. In each instance, the Tasmanian Aboriginal people are on display, but the level of community control and subtext is notably different. This article builds on discussions of cultural revitalization and reclamation by showing the process and how it is depicted for public consumption. [cultural revitalization, representation, indigeneity, Tasmania, Australia]

Australia's Aboriginal peoples have been central to how anthropologists have historically thought about progress and difference. Tasmania's Aboriginal peoples receive less attention, both in Australia and in discussions of global indigenous movements. Before and after their supposed extinction in 1876, they were considered the most "primitive" culture ever documented (Darwin 2004; Stocking 1987; Tylor 1894; among many others).

Ideologies of primitivism have historically been perpetuated and disseminated by cultural institutions around the world. James Clifford (1997) recounts a 1989 community consultation meeting with Tlingit representatives at the Portland Museum of Art during which the Tlingit people told politically motivated tales about community concerns like land rights. The story of the Raven, as conveyed by Austin Hammond, is particularly valuable. It begins as the Raven flies

down the whale's blowhole, sets up a little stove, and cooks the salmon the whale swallows. But he can't get out. The humorous tale turns tragic. To our white brothers here, Hammond says,

our prayers are like the Raven's. Who will cut open the whale, so we can come out? [Clifford 1997:190]

This story is an apt metaphor for the fraught relationships between indigenous communities and cultural institutions.

In past decades, many indigenous communities have challenged (and often co-opted) the "savage slot" (Trouillot 1991) by employing the tools of their entrapment to aid in their escape. The ethnographic literature is full of insightful instances of indigenous-created media and self-representation in film, television, and museum exhibitions. In national museums such as the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., and the Museum of New Zealand's Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington, New Zealand, the "Natives" have asserted authority over how their histories are told. These changes, in terms of control, authority, and approach, are representative of a broader perspectival shift from *primitive pasts* to *indigenous futures*. This shift is marked by changes in nomenclature and temporal focus.

This article focuses on the design and execution of two exhibitions about Tasmanian Aboriginality at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG). The first is a Tasmanian Aboriginal group exhibit, comprised of a mother-father-child triad, from 1931 (Figure 1).¹ This exhibit was heavily informed by social evolutionary ideologies and denied Tasmanian Aboriginal continued existence and cultural dynamism. The second is the 2008 exhibition *tayenebe*, which celebrates the resurgence of Tasmanian Aboriginal women's fiber work. In both cases, the Tasmanian Aboriginal people are on display either through their objects or cultural surrogates. The levels of community involvement and subtext, however, are markedly different.

For my discussion of Tasmanian Aboriginality at TMAG, I rely on Annemarie Mol's (2002) discussion and use of the term enactment. In her book, Mol recounts her experiences studying atherosclerosis at Hospital Z, an intentionally anonymous teaching hospital in the Netherlands. After observing numerous departments and the varying ways atherosclerosis was imagined (or brought into being as an object of study), Mol concluded that there are many different



Figure 1. Aboriginal group exhibit at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. (Permission of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Collection: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Photo taken by the museum.)

forms of atherosclerosis that exist under the singular umbrella term. Depending on the tools employed, be it a microscope, the leg of a deceased person, or conversation, a form of atherosclerosis is brought into being, only it is not necessarily the same one.

Mol's conceptualization of enactment provides a more nuanced understanding of creation than terms like "construction," which suggest "that material is assembled, put together, and turned into an object that subsequently goes out in the world all by itself" (2002:32). By emphasizing process, the ethnographer "stubbornly takes notice of the techniques that make things visible, audible, tangible, knowable" (Mol 2002:33). In light of these insights, my analysis foregrounds skeletal materials, plaster of Paris, wiring, and paint, and the jobs to which they were entrusted in the 1931 group exhibit, and how they worked together to exclude and dismiss alternative Tasmanian Aboriginalities. It is this gap between the presumably idyllic and extinct Tasmanian people and the contemporary community that *tayenebe* and other exhibits seek to close. *Tayenebe's* underlying (and often overt) goal was to somehow acknowledge difference (from the historical ancestors; between the "old" and "new" baskets) while demonstrating continuity and connection. To understand how this was accomplished, I pay attention to baskets and kelp water carriers. In each instance, people are attempting to create and present something about the Tasma-

nians that operates around ideologies of loss, albeit in very different ways.

THE TASMANIAN MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY AND THE 1931 GROUP EXHIBIT

Overlooking the Derwent River in downtown Hobart, the TMAG is Australia's second oldest museum and one of its three remaining "museum-and-art galleries."² It began in 1848 as the Royal Society of Tasmania's collection and became the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in 1889 (Hughes et al. 2007:4).

While viewing indigenous peoples as ephemeral was (and continues to be) quite common, the Tasmanian case is unique because, to the general and scientific public, they were thought to be gone. The collection of Tasmanian Aboriginal remains by museums, royal societies, and universities (among others), frequently through illegal means like grave robbing, reinforced the myth of extinction. Their presumed scientific value served to rationalize such actions (Urry 1989). TMAG was not innocent of such practices, having displayed the skeletal remains of Truganini, the "last Tasmanian," from 1903 to 1947. The closest American equivalent is Ishi, the "last Yahi" (Clifford 2013; Kroeber 1961). As the last "full-blooded" Tasmanian Aboriginal person, Truganini's 1876 death marked the ideological death of her people.³ A 1924 article from the Tasmanian newspaper, the *Mercury*, describes TMAG's exhibition spaces.

Interspersed with exquisite photographs of model canoes, baskets, and human skulls, the text guides the reader through the museum. The author notes how the “largest single collection in the world of osteological specimens relating to the extinct Tasmanian race has been gathered in that room—a collection priceless both in scientific interest and intrinsic value” (*Mercury* 1924:5). In addition, there was one specimen that deserved “more than passing remark,” namely “the skeleton of Trucanini, the last of the Tasmanian race, who died in 1876. To the anthropologist it is one of absorbing scientific interest, and it is by the researches of anthropologists of the past that the people of to-day gain” (*Mercury* 1924:5). Through the collection and curation of human and non-human cultural materials, the TMAG supported (and buttressed) many of the prevailing ideologies of Tasmanian Aboriginality, including nonexistence.

The 1931 group exhibit, like the American Museum of Natural History’s Akeley dioramas, is “eminently a story . . . told in the pages of nature, read by the naked eye” (Haraway 1989:29). For Donna Haraway, dioramas are “meaning-machines” through which nature “is, in ‘fact,’ constructed as a technology through social praxis” (1989:54). The group exhibit told stories of progress and accumulation. In curatorial practice, such stories usually take the form of typological displays of similar objects from different cultures and regions grouped together to show the hierarchical stages of universal progress. The exemplary instance of this practice was, and continues to be, Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum (Chapman 1985). Jean Baudrillard playfully describes this deft interplay between museum displays and social evolutionary ideologies, commenting that our “entire linear and accumulative culture collapses if we cannot stockpile the past in plain view” (1994:10). The group exhibit was envisioned as a necessary response to a fundamental lack, namely the supposed nonexistence of the Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples. As a visual representation, the group’s figures combined with human remains to form a “moiety of past life to give reality to a present figment” (*Mercury* 1931a:6).

BUILDING BODIES AT THE MUSEUM

Group exhibits and dioramas descend directly from public displays of human beings. From a menagerie of Native Americans (among other groups) at

Chicago’s World’s Columbian Exposition (Boas 1893) to Pocahontas at the court of King James, there is a long history of indigenous and Native peoples being put on display. This history was brilliantly critiqued in Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s “Couple in the Cage” (Fusco and Heredia 1993). Despite criticisms, such displays are imagined as offering an authenticity lacking in traditional ethnological exhibits. Franz Boas designed a number of Northwest Coast group exhibits for the American Museum of Natural History, writing in 1896 that it “is the avowed object of a large group to transport the visitor into foreign surroundings. He is to see the whole village and the way the people live” (Jacknis 1985:101). A 1931 *Mercury* article presents the aim of TMAG’s group exhibit in comparable terms: “In these days, group exhibits are looked upon by scientists generally, as the proper way to show objects, instead of in the purely conventional and isolated manner of the glass case containing an array having small relation to ideas” (*Mercury* 1931a:6). While Boas notably designed group exhibits to avoid, and in fact counter, evolutionary schema, there are countless cases in which such visual technologies were informed by ideologies of primitivism and progress. Lynette Russell has found that Australian Aboriginal group exhibits mainly focus “on economic pursuits; they are centred around the preparation of food. Women are usually shown undertaking grinding, or other cooking preparations, and childcare. Most of the dioramas showed men returning to camp with game draped over their shoulders” (1999:38). TMAG’s group exhibit had a similar arrangement:

A Tasmanian Aboriginal camp, an old kitchen midden and the figures will be shown as illustrating the life and habits of the vanished people. The foregrounds of the group will be built, and given actual form, so as to portray conditions of actuality. [*Mercury* 1931a:6]

The figures of the male, female, and child representatives of the aboriginal inhabitants of Tasmania are grouped on a beach with Mount Wellington and the river as a background, which is carved to give stereoscopic effect. [*Mercury* 1931b:10]

In the centre of the scene is a fire, beside which the woman is sitting, tending the roasting of several crayfish. Just behind her is the child, watching anxiously the cooking operations and to the right is the man, carrying a strip of gum-bark for the building of the hut, the beginning of which is shown. [*Mercury* 1931b:10]

Upon its completion, this exhibit would allow later generations to see via a “glance at almost reality, the kind of people who once fished, played, and fought, where now stands Hobart” (*Mercury* 1931b:10).

There are multiple *leitmotifs* woven throughout the newspaper accounts of the TMAG exhibit’s creation, the most prominent being near-reality and near-regeneration/cultural (or racial) resuscitation. Viewed in concert, they foreground the understanding that these figures are lifelike surrogates for the Tasmanian Aboriginal people, but their surrogacy is inherently incomplete. Although it was imagined as offering a realistic representation of Tasmanian Aboriginality, it remained “not quite,” which reminded the observer that extinction was irreversible. Returning to Mol (2002), this is far from an “object that subsequently goes out in the world all by itself,” but one created and maintained.

The January 22, 1931, edition of the *Mercury* provides an exhaustive account of the construction of the exhibit. I quote it at length to show the presence of the aforementioned leitmotifs and to reflect upon the macabre nature of such work. The scene is of Melburnian sculptor E. J. Dicks, whom the TMAG had hired to build the figures, hard at work in a Hobart studio. The article describes a revolving platform upon which

[Dicks] builds his frame-work of lead piping and wood, using the iron standard of the clamp-frame as the upright to carry the length of the body. Lead piping gives stability to the arms, iron stays to the legs, and the head-frame consists of two pieces of lead piping, one bent round the other, to support head and neck. . . . Having disposed his frame in the correct position, the arm extensions are bent to the required angle, and actual work begins. At first little more than masses of clay are used to fill in the body of the statue, the legs, head and arms, but as the basic

structure increases, the pieces of clay used decrease in size. *Gradually a skull-like head appears*, attenuated arms and legs showing outlined muscles, and the general form of the body is seen. . . . *It is now that out of dead clay emerges living form until at the end the result appears like a piece of suddenly halted life, checked in its action.* With subtle touch and delicate moving fingers the modeler moulds expression, thought, movement, life, till at last there stands before him, *almost living*, the idea that had slept in his brain, less than a breath, *yet not a reality.* [*Mercury* 1931c:3, emphasis added]

After framing/molding and casting, the pieces are joined to form the near reality of the presumably authentic Tasmanian Aboriginal people. A short blurb from February 1931, aptly titled *Building Bodies*, emphasizes:

The delight of the sculptor as he puts together, *limb by limb*, the products of his mind and hands, who is engaged in the modeling of the aboriginal group for the Tasmanian Museum. The male figure of the group, now cast in plaster, *stands complete with the exception of the head*, while the clay model of the female figure is nearing completion and its head has already been cast. *The head of the male figure sits upon its neck on the artist’s table*, while experiments are carried out upon it with regard to colouring. The colour for the face has been brought almost to finality, and looks most natural. The stringy hair is in process of being tinted to discover the most satisfactory colour, and presents at the moment a somewhat patchy appearance. [*Mercury* 1931d:6, emphasis added]

On Friday, May 22, 1931, the group exhibit was unveiled and lauded for its perceived accuracy:

It is all so natural and lifelike that it has almost the effect of shock to realise that it is only an exhibit, *and not a living fact*. The groupings and setting have been done with such accuracy and detail, based on the most authoritative historical evidence, that *the effect is one of reality* . . . its naturalness and charm . . . give one so vividly to realise the life in this island all those centuries

before the dawn of civilisation. [*Mercury* 1931b:10, emphasis added]

The group exhibit “occupies the whole of one end of the large room on the right of the main entrance,” and along the sloping base of the containing case,

there are bas-reliefs of William Lanne and Truganini, the last male and female Tasmanian aborigines, with a series of illustrated descriptive tablets, showing on one side the history of the race, and on the other the general characteristics of the original Tasmanians. [*Mercury* 1931b:10]⁴

The unveiling was accompanied by public addresses and comments from W. H. Clemes, the chair of the Museum Trustees; the Honourable H. S. Baker, the Attorney-General; Clive Lord, the museum’s curator; and W. L. Crowther, scientist and collector of Aboriginal remains.⁵

Mr. Clemes proposed a vote of thanks to the Attorney-General, and in doing so alluded to the long research and painstaking efforts made by Mr. Clive Lord and Dr. W. L. Crowther to ensure absolute and authoritative accuracy throughout. . . . Dr. Crowther, seconding the vote of thanks, said that the exhibit was the realisation of a dream which had been with them for many years. In designing the group they had sought to strike the imagination of children. For long they had desired to have a picture of paleolithic man, in order that the children growing up in the community should realise clearly the nature and habits of the aboriginals of Tasmania. [*Mercury* 1931b:10]

The exhibit’s stated goal was to provide an image of Aboriginal Tasmania, one composed of plaster, wiring, and paint. By highlighting their “lowly” position within social evolutionary schemas, the TMAG enacted a Tasmanian Aboriginality incompatible with lived (and living) realities.

Debates about the group exhibit center around its perceived inaccuracies. As Julie Gough, Tasmanian Aboriginal artist and *tayenebe*’s curator, points out, the “figures are based on Truganini and Woorrady with a child, which Truganini, who was physically maltreated by Europeans, was unlikely to have ever

had,” and the “scene freezes Aboriginal Tasmanians into ‘no-time’; into an unknowable distancing space. In this it both justifies and illustrates the story of genocide, rather than dispelling it as a myth” (Gough 2001:36–37). In 1992, the TMAG acknowledged such problems by posting a “dilemma label” explaining that the exhibit presented a Euro-centric “nuclear family” that was not the historical norm among Tasmanian Aboriginal people and that men were not the primary “breadwinners” as depicted by the man bringing home the proverbial bacon. Other details of the group exhibit, however, have been lauded for their accuracy. Through the use of available materials, such as Benjamin Law’s Aboriginal busts, its designers aimed to make the figures as “life-like” as possible (Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery 1976:13–14).⁶

Framing the debate in terms of accuracy, however, overlooks the group exhibit’s central problem. Its singularity erased and dismissed alternatives. It was framed as the definitive representation of a lost people, and this message remained overpowering in spite of subsequent “window dressing.” I visited the TMAG many times in 2004, and, in spite of my best efforts, the image of the Aboriginal nuclear family was burned into my mind. Despite more recent text discussing the contemporary community, the messages embodied in the figures were difficult to ignore. In 2004, Senior Indigenous Cultures Curator Tony Brown, a Tasmanian Aboriginal person from Cape Barren Island, expressed his frustrations about its continuing presence and pessimism about possible alterations, telling me how “people from the mainland, as well as from overseas, come and look at the diorama and look at those figures, and get their idea of what Aboriginal people looked like.”⁷ Despite such pessimism, major changes were eventually made at the museum. In 2007, the old gallery was taken down and replaced by *ningina tunapri*, a concerted community effort that exemplified a broader reclamation narrative.⁸ A critical component of *ningina tunapri* was a Tasmanian Aboriginal bark canoe, which was constructed as part of a 2007 commonwealth-funded cultural revitalization project. The project’s core resources were miniature canoes in the museum’s collection, descriptions from people like George Augustus Robinson (Plomley 1987, 2008), and the paintings and drawings of Lesueur and other artists from the “voyages of discovery.” In a novel move, the

museum had a miniature canoe CAT scanned at the Royal Hobart Hospital. The results provided significant insight into the model's interior structure as well as its intricate tie system. Bark was collected on Aboriginal land on Bruny Island, and after extensive trial and error (partly in response to fumigating the bark strips so they could be housed and used in the museum), the team devised a system to re-moisturize the dried-out materials for improved pliability. The final product was a five meter-long canoe that now serves as *ningina tunapri*'s centerpiece. As the first Aboriginal made canoe in roughly one hundred and seventy years, its presence at the front of the gallery is a powerful statement of continuity and community strength.

Ningina tunapri serves as conceptual connective tissue between the group exhibit and *tayenebe*, challenging the former and inspiring the latter. It was installed in a space that had previously housed the group exhibit and Tasmanian Aboriginal remains, including Truganini's. During my time at the museum, Tasmanian Aboriginal curators Tony Brown and Zoe Rimmer expressed how the presence of *ningina tunapri* cleansed and redeemed the space.⁹ In addition, the successful canoe project served as a template for the revitalization of the Tasmanian Aboriginal women's fiber work at *tayenebe*'s core.

TAYENEBE, METONYMS, AND THE CRAFTING OF CONNECTION

Richard Handler describes "an enduring tension, in the museum world and beyond, between the idea that the value of objects is relative and contingent, and the idea that true value is based upon universal criteria and is intrinsic to the object itself" (1992:21). This dichotomy, between what Handler calls the "relativistic" and "positivist/essentialist" positions, has strongly influenced museological theory and curatorial practice over the past 30 years. Regardless of which side one favors, I think we can all acknowledge that some value of museum objects emerges through activities like collecting and marketing (Handler 1992:26). Meaning is also enacted in relation to the larger exhibitionary or institutional context. It is an anthropological truism that displaying the same object in an art gallery versus a natural history museum creates (and perpetuates) different mean-

ings and valuations. The rhetoric around "authentic primitive art" is instructive in this regard. Often defined as art by appropriation (or metamorphosis) rather than art by intention, non-Western objects have historically been separated from classical forms of art. The emphasis on objects as "art" (primitive or otherwise) in art galleries involves a concurrent minimization of cultural context and use, the very things traditionally emphasized at museums of ethnology and natural history.¹⁰

Shelly Errington (1994:202) highlights the connections between institutional settings and classificatory systems by summarizing the shifting categorizations of non-Western objects during their journey to the Rockefeller Wing of New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art. My motivation in discussing these issues is not to dredge up the category of authentic primitive art, as that corpse has hopefully been put to rest within anthropology, if perhaps not among the general public. I do so to stress the polysemic nature of these meanings. They are contextual and situational. The meaning of the miniature canoe when on display alongside the full-sized one in *ningina tunapri* is very different than when it was displayed next to the group exhibit and Truganini's skeletal remains. Whereas in the past, it served as a marker of death and loss, it now represents a link in a continuous chain. Museum objects also have a metonymic quality. They tend to "stand in" (or act as surrogates) for their creators as well as the creators' cultural group. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett distinguishes between in situ and in context framings of the ethnographic object, arguing that the "notion of in situ entails metonymy and mimesis: the object is a part that stands in a contiguous relation to an absent whole that may or may not be re-created" (1998:19). In general, the judgment (through whatever means) of objects as valuable or not extends to their creators and creators' culture. Such judgments have real consequences within the realm of cultural performance and revitalization. This is especially true for groups such as the Tasmanian Aboriginal people, who have been defined by a disjuncture and break from (or gap with) their tribal past. Recent re-construction and re-activation of "traditional" Tasmanian Aboriginal culture has, however, allowed the community to prove, via fiber baskets and bark canoes, their existence and fill in these gaps.

A lot was riding on the success (or failure) of *tayenebe*, which aimed to reframe historical baskets while celebrating the practice's "return" as embodied in the newly crafted objects. Then TMAG Director Bill Bleathman remembers the seeds of *tayenebe* first emerging out of discussions at Canberra's National Museum of Australia (NMA) in 2006, noting how "Tasmanian Aboriginal women had expressed a need to revitalise basket-making knowledge, techniques and processes throughout the Community for future generations" (Bleathman 2009:1). The project was funded by a commonwealth Cultural Retrieval Program and was co-managed by the TMAG, the NMA, and Arts Tasmania.¹¹ Its two key interrelated components were "on country" workshops and a traveling exhibit. This project was important for a number of reasons. Following *ningina tunapri*, it represented an additional act of good faith on the part of the TMAG. Furthermore, the successful revitalization of fiber work, whether it be kelp water carriers or twined baskets, would provide the Aboriginal community with an additional item of demonstrable alterity, not to mention a connection to their ancestral culture.

Seven workshops were held throughout Tasmania between May 2006 and November 2008 (Greeno 2009). These workshops stressed the sharing of space, time, and knowledge. *Tayenebe* curator Julie Gough recounts how prior to the project "[the skill] was only in the hands of two or three women—now there's 35 who took part in the workshops" (Mercury 2009:13). The revitalization process followed that of the bark canoes. These practices had essentially ceased by the turn of the 20th century and revitalization relied on historical descriptions and objects in institutional collections. A. L. Meston describes how "the women were skilled in making baskets by a simple plaiting method, using fibre obtained from *Gahnia* or *Dianella* softened while green in front of a fire. They also made water vessels from kelp fastened into shape with wooden skewers" (1965:105).¹² Such descriptions were paired with drawings and paintings from Petit and Lesueur (Bonnemains et al. 1988) and the 37 historical baskets known to be in cultural institutions (Gough 2009a:22). Seventeen of these baskets are housed in the TMAG, ten of which were "gathered" by Joseph Milligan at the Wybalenna settlement on Flinders Island and donated to the museum in 1851. As was the case with the model canoes CAT scanned

for *ningina tunapri*, these 19th-century baskets have been conduits of connection—in being instructive, inspirational, and aspirational—for the contemporary revival of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture.¹³

One of my focal tasks during my 2008 internship in the TMAG's Indigenous Cultures Department was aiding Julie Gough with researching and planning *tayenebe*. As planned, the exhibition featured historical and contemporary baskets and therefore involved the joining together of objects with different temporalities and meanings. Because I had been steeped in the literatures about the art-artifact divide and authentic primitive art, I was concerned that the viewing public would judge the historical objects as the "real thing" at the expense of the new objects (and their makers). The makers themselves acknowledged a gap between past and present but did not want it emphasized. At the time, I (wrongly) interpreted their downplaying as an obfuscation or erasure of loss. Subsequent fieldwork, however, taught me that the "lost period" is not ignored but is bridged in creative ways. In this sense, it truly is "gap-work," as the makers themselves foreground the continuity of their internal essences at the expense of surface disconnections (i.e., phenotypes, et cetera).

Tayenebe, not unlike the group exhibit, was an enactment of a particular idea of Tasmanian Aboriginality. A number of its core messages emerged during a July 24, 2008 TMAG meeting with many project participants. Beforehand, I was entrusted with placing the "Milligan baskets" on a long and narrow table for inspection. In retrospect, this day served as a foundation for my understanding of how the women involved understood revitalization. It also showed me how ancestral connections (and continuity of tradition) could be fabricated, not in the sense of constructing a falsehood but in the weaving together of different parts.¹⁴ The women wanted the process of creation and its communal value to be central, not the object's aesthetic beauty or the end product. Because many individuals were still new to the practice, this sentiment was assuredly fueled in part by anxiety over the perceived quality of their work. That being said, it also reflected their desire for the exhibition to stress cultural return, connections to place and people, and shared workshop experiences. One person commented on how *tayenebe* is about collective making, "passing knowledge on and how to

make. It is a process of learning and coming together as women. Inspiration comes from that coming together.”¹⁵ This statement is a tacit commentary on the rights of Aboriginal people to practice their culture. This is a real concern, as many prime grass and fiber collection spots are on private property. The women spoke about how meaningful it was to share their experiences and knowledge with one another and how “on country” workshops strengthened their sense of (and connection to) place. As one person said, “It’s about getting together, something happens. It’s joy, jokes, and laughter. It makes you stronger. . . . Aboriginal women together get strength, and then we go off again.”¹⁶

I felt a notable symmetry between the meeting’s discussions and my own concerns, particularly regarding how the “lost period” would be addressed, if at all. Rhetoric pivoted around a physiological inheritance of an internal essence that has remained pure despite temporal and biological separation. The innate knowledge is positioned as “sleeping” until it is “safe” to re-emerge. Such language foregrounds the agency of the contemporary women as active conduits of re-connection. As one participant said, “We have been thinking about it, contemplating it until we were ready. Now we are ready.”¹⁷ I was also concerned with the variable utility of the new baskets (Figure 2) in relation to their 19th-century counterparts. Historical displays of baskets have

emphasized their use and creation as receptacles and means of transport. This potential binary (often operating in terms of perceived authenticity) was short-circuited by a telling statement enacting a continuity of both practice and practitioner. At the meeting, Verna Nichols said the “baskets are not empty. They are full of makers, their stories, their thoughts while making. The baskets are not empty. All of the thoughts jump out of the baskets and onto all of us.”¹⁸ This statement inspired one of the exhibit’s major themes, and that it was printed on the *tayenebe* catalogue’s back cover highlights its importance (Gough 2009b).

While the baskets remain metonyms for the larger culture, what they represent has changed. Nineteenth-century collectors emphasized object over maker, as indicated by the informational gaps accompanying their entrance into museum collections. This was true for Joseph Milligan, who we can assume knew the maker’s identities during his time at Wybalenna. The makers are anonymous (and disenfranchised), and their baskets were commonly displayed as the metaphorical last breath of a dead people. More recently, however, the same baskets served as reference points for the *tayenebe* project, which effectively redefined both object and maker. It matters that the first incarnation of *tayenebe* that opened at the TMAG in July 2004 featured baskets made by historical Elders Fanny Cochrane Smith and Truganini.¹⁹ By



Figure 2. New baskets and water carriers commissioned for *tayenebe*. (Photo by Christopher Berk.)

orienting them in relation to cultural resurgence, the very meaning (and presentation) of these historical objects shifted from the solemn remains of a lost culture to inspirational evidence of contemporary practice. The baskets are also emblematic of the ancestors' willpower and defiance in the face of massive cultural disruption and dislocation.

EXCHANGE AND KEEPING FOR ONESELF

The exhibit's title, *tayenebe*, a Bruny Island word for "exchange," points to the relationships among cultural groups and across time periods. Julie Gough addressed this point in a 2009 *Mercury* article:

Tayenebe means exchange, it's a story of how things have been exchanged through time. . . . In the beginning it was sometimes more of a taking, now it's more a gifting and a sharing between the women and the institutions where the exhibits are touring. [*Mercury* 2009:13]

The use of "gift" is valuable and foregrounds the delicate interplay between giving and taking. *Tayenebe* is framed as a gift among Tasmanian Aboriginal women and between the women and the viewing public. However, as with cultural objects and knowledge of great value, something must be kept private. For example, the women were concerned about images depicting the stages of basket making. One person said that photos were usually okay, just not "of starting a basket and not in sequence," while another suggested we "take out close-up photos of techniques."²⁰ The desire to keep this knowledge for themselves was reflected in comments like the following: "it has become precious and sacred because it has not been part of our every day," "we want to protect [it] as ours for the future," and "we are still trying to own our knowledge. No one has the right to take it away again."²¹ Such statements reflect the bridging of a gap and an acknowledgment that cultural secrets exist and must remain as such.

Annette Weiner's (1985) iconic work on inalienable wealth and "keeping while giving" is indispensable here. While she tends to emphasize individual ownership, it is more productive in this context to focus on group ownership and the benefits of inalienability (as well as the hazards of loss) with respect to historical identity and the relationship between the past and present. For Weiner, "keeping things instead

of giving them away is essential if one is to retain some measure of one's social identity in the face of potential loss and the constant need to give away what is most valued" (1985:211). Furthermore, "keeping an object defined as inalienable adds to the value of one's past, making the past a powerful resource for the present and the future" (Weiner 1985:224). The resurgence of fiber work effectively enacted a continuity of practice and a claim to the past as embodied by secret knowledge that must not be shared with the general public. The women's comments demonstrate a palpable recognition that the practice, and the knowledge behind it, have been lost before and could be lost again. Accompanying these feelings was a strong sense that it was their responsibility as Tasmanian Aboriginal people to protect what remains and what has been resurrected (or "awoken"). This marks a valuable point of overlap between *tayenebe* and earlier efforts by the Tasmanian populace, the group exhibit being a notable example, to "revive" something that was theirs that they had lost (i.e., its indigenous population). The group exhibit's enactment of a uniquely Tasmanian Aboriginality set Tasmania apart from the rest of Australia by providing it with something that was distinctly theirs.

TAYENEBE ON DISPLAY

Tayenebe circulated certain notions of cultural stability and vitality to an interstate audience for consecration and legitimation. I saw the exhibit in Canberra in 2010 and Sydney in 2011.²² Doing so allowed me to connect the 2008 conversations I had had with those involved in the exhibit with the final product. The arrangements of the display cases were nearly identical in both locales, with minor allowances for different spatial dimensions. Their organization reflected a desire to avoid direct comparison of the baskets from different eras, with old and new intermixed throughout the various cases. In Canberra, at the NMA, the exhibit curved in a semi-circle, with cases and text panels on both sides, thus requiring viewers to walk around them. In addition, viewers could choose which side to enter. Without a clear start or finish, the overall effect was cumulative not teleological. The baskets were displayed together rather than segregated by age, which foregrounded the equivalences between the baskets and between their makers.

The makers actively shaped their public narrative. The labels and text panels reflected many of the concerns expressed during the 2008 meeting, evidenced by the women's own words on display. Case labels focused on the connections between past and present and between the community and the land ("being home—people, place and plants"; "unique island/unique people"), the symbolic utility of baskets ("carrying culture—the land and sea are one"), and inherent cultural essence and the enactment of continuity ("not lost, just sleeping"). One case focused on how the participants had toyed with materials and styles ("innovating with the inheritance"). Verna Nichols, for example, had made a basket out of bull kelp, river reed, and echidna quills.²³ Another example is *Yolla . . . a tribute to the strength to survive in the face of adversity*, made by Vicki Matson-Green, which combines a traditional white flag iris basket with muttonbird feathers.²⁴ Finally, a number of the women wove maireener shells into their baskets, further combining traditional materials in nontraditional ways. Viewed as a whole, these new styles are evidence of cultural vibrancy and a community confident enough to take their practices in new directions (Gough 2009a:32). This acknowledgment (and celebration) of diversity can be viewed as a subtle commentary on past representations of static (and singular) Tasmanian Aboriginal culture.

The visible and active presence of Tasmanian Aboriginal people was a core element of the traveling exhibit, with each stop featuring curator talks from Julie Gough and demonstrations by project participants. My wife and I took part in the programs at the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney in April 2011. This stop's demonstrators were Vicki Matson-Green and Patsy Cameron—two strong Elders from Flinders Island who now live in northern Tasmania. Following Julie Gough's gallery talk in the morning, the weavers and I talked about community issues and topics over lunch. Then the real fun began. The demonstrations required actual Tasmanian materials and Matson-Green and Cameron had travelled from Tasmania with recently collected grass and kelp. Preparation for the afternoon's demonstration involved a whirlwind of activity. As we walked around, our arms full of kelp and grass fibers, Matson-Green said, with a bit of a wink, "we Tasmanian women have trodded on a few toes since we've been

here." This comment was not so much a statement of fact, for the women were quite respectful to the museum's employees, but rather a commentary on the forceful "take charge" attitude common among *tayenebe*'s participants. My fondest memory is from a kitchen area where we worked to rehydrate the massive pieces of bull kelp. The materiality of the kelp shifted from that of a dry wetsuit to a vibrant and malleable hunter green. The grass was submerged in a tub of water to improve its pliability. Tables were set up near the museum's entrance and covered with kelp and fiber samples for visitors to "have a go" at twining (Figure 3). The women were open and kind, and the value of their presence was undeniable (Figure 4).

The day's events concluded with an "after hours" gallery talk and exhibition walkthrough involving drinks and nibbles. As with the exhibit itself, the talk stressed return rather than loss. Indigenous people were "on display," albeit in a context in which they had a semblance of control over the content and meaning of their performance. Although it is difficult to gauge the overall impact of the various events, visitor interest and enthusiasm was palpable. At one point, I overheard an older gentleman commenting on the supposed stone-age level of the Tasmanians, saying how he had "always been told that they were a stone-age peoples, because they didn't make pottery, but these [the baskets] are incredibly skillful."²⁵ One reading of this statement is that while the exhibition undermined this person's idea that "stone-age peoples" lacked skill, it nonetheless failed to challenge the view of the Tasmanians as "stone-age."²⁶ A separate but related reading is that challenging such ideologies takes time, and this comment perhaps marks a valuable starting point in a long journey. At the very least, *tayenebe* had prompted a degree of critical reflection.

CONCLUSION

These two exhibits represent very different approaches to enacting Tasmanian Aboriginal culture for public consumption. They do not represent a strict dichotomy, with projects of self-representation like *tayenebe* serving as panaceas to cure representational crimes of the past. In fact, the two projects share many of the same critical elements, including a partially idealized depiction of Tasmanian Aboriginality. There are crucial differences, however. For instance, they exemplify a broader shift in perspective



Figure 3. *Tayenebe* demonstration in Sydney. (Photo by Christopher Berk.)



Figure 4. Patsy Cameron and Vicki Matson-Green at the *tayenebe* demonstration. (Photo by Christopher Berk.)

from primitive pasts to indigenous (or Aboriginal) futures. The Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples have historically been defined (more so than most) by what their ancestors represented within social evolutionary frameworks, and, as a result, their value for cultural institutions (and anthropology) has been the proposed light their Paleolithic past shed onto European cultural history. Such a backwards-looking perspective informed the 1931 group exhibit. Moreover,

extensive disjuncture and cultural dislocation essentially forced contemporary community members to utilize historical records, accounts, and objects in service of revitalizing “lost” practices of material culture production and language. In essence, the community had to look backwards in order to have the opportunity to look forward.

Tayenebe’s focus on the present and future was (and continues to be) exhilarating for all involved.

During the 2008 planning meeting, one prominent Elder gently chided Julie Gough for getting sidetracked by her interest in the colonial period, saying that “this exhibition is about now.”²⁷ On a similar point, another participant said we must “stop looking at old history. Listen to what people are saying together today. Learn about now again.”²⁸ This perspective is prevalent in recent intercultural and community-controlled displays and exhibits. In the Tasmanian case, it indicates the presence of a vital and revitalized cultural practice that is no longer reliant on historical evidence for reinforcement. Presenting culture in such a manner, plus showcasing newly emergent styles and designs, is a strong statement to make to both Tasmanian and wider Australian audiences.

NOTES

1. Group exhibits are dioramas depicting a group of individuals engaged in activity. I use this label to be consistent with the historical sources.
2. The name refers to institutions whose collections and specialties combine art and natural history. Australia's other two museum and art galleries are the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston, Tasmania, and the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory near Darwin. Within the Australian context, the TMAG's age is second only to Sydney's Australian Museum.
3. Truganini's remains were returned to the community in 1976 and scattered in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel (Ryan 1996:264). See Taylor 2012 for Truganini's place in Australian historiography.
4. William Lanne was thought to be the last Tasmanian Aboriginal man. He passed away in 1869.
5. The Crowther Collection was drawn mostly from graves at the Oyster Cove Aboriginal settlement. The majority of the collection was returned to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community in 1984.
6. Truganini and Woorrady both sat before sculptor Benjamin Law in the 1830s. The TMAG has multiple Law busts in its collection.
7. Personal communication, March 1, 2004.
8. The title is *palawa kani*, meaning: “To give knowledge and understanding.”
9. Field notes, June 22, 2010.
10. These categorical separations involve the “denial of coevalness” (Fabian 1983). The canonical anthropological texts on these topics include Clifford 1988 and Price 1989. See Morphy 2008 and Myers 1998 and 2002 for discussions (and classifications) of Aboriginal art in Australia.
11. The *tayenebe* website provides additional project information: <http://static.tmag.tas.gov.au/tayenebe/tayenebe.html>, accessed July 11, 2014.
12. See Plomley 1977:144–145 and Roth 1899:144–145 for additional descriptions of the process and Gough 2009a for a discussion of colonial intercultural encounters and the roles played by baskets.
13. Fienup-Riordan 2005 and Haakanson Jr. and Steffian 2009 provide additional instances of indigenous communities utilizing museum collections as part of revitalization efforts.
14. <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/fabricate?q=fabricate>, accessed July 21, 2014.
15. Meeting notes, July 24, 2008.
16. Meeting notes, July 24, 2008.
17. Meeting notes, July 24, 2008.
18. Meeting notes, July 24, 2008.
19. Truganini's basket was on loan from Launceston's Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery.
20. Meeting notes, July 24, 2008.
21. Meeting notes, July 24, 2008.
22. After showing at the TMAG, *tayenebe* was at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra (March 25–July 25, 2010); Queensland Museum, Brisbane (August 21–November 21, 2010); Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney (March 26–May 5, 2011); Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne (August 30–October 23, 2011); and Flinders University City Gallery, Adelaide (December 16, 2011–February 19, 2012). <http://static.tmag.tas.gov.au/tayenebe/tayenebe.html>, accessed July 11, 2014.
23. <http://static.tmag.tas.gov.au/tayenebe/makers/VernaNichols/index.html>, accessed July 11, 2014.
24. <http://static.tmag.tas.gov.au/tayenebe/makers/VickiMatson-Green/index.html>, accessed July 11, 2014.
25. Field notes, April 13, 2011.
26. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to push this point a bit further.
27. Meeting notes, July 24, 2008.
28. Meeting notes, July 24, 2008.

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